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Integrating Critical Literary Frameworks Into Arabic Language Learning: A Design-Based Research Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to develop and empirically test the Critical Literary-Based Arabic Learning (CLAL) model, which integrates reader-response theory and critical pedagogy to address the overemphasis on grammar in traditional Arabic instruction. Employing a design-based research (DBR) approach, the model was implemented with 90 undergraduate students from three distinct programs at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang: Arabic Language Education (FITK), Arabic Language and Literature (FH), and an Advanced Arabic Class (PPB). Data were collected through reading comprehension tests, writing assessments, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The findings demonstrated significant improvements in students' reading comprehension (pre-test mean = 58.4, post-test mean = 78.9, $p < .001$, $d = 1.78$), alongside enhancements in critical thinking and language production. The resulting five-stage CLAL model, comprising text exposure, personal response, critical reflection, collaborative discussion, and language production, offers Arabic educators a practical, empirically validated framework for shifting pedagogy toward interpretive, reflective, and student-centered learning.

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Keyword

Arabic language learning; critical literary frameworks; reader-response theory; design-based research

مستخلص البحث

لطالما هيمنت المناهج النحوية على تعلم اللغة العربية، والتي تهمل الأبعاد التفسيرية والنقدية لاستخدام اللغة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دمج الأطر الأدبية النقدية - نظرية استجابة القارئ وعلم أصول التدريس النقدي - في تعليم اللغة العربية. باستخدام منهج البحث القائم على التصميم (DBR)، تم تطوير وتنفيذ نموذج تعلم اللغة العربية القائم على الأدب النقدي (CLAL) في جامعة مولانا مالك إبراهيم الإسلامية الحكومية مالانج، بمشاركة ٩٠ طالباً جامعياً من ثلاثة برامج مختلفة، وهي: برنامج تعليم اللغة العربية (FITK)، وبرنامج اللغة العربية وأدائها (FH)، والفصل المتقدم للغة العربية في مركز تطوير اللغة (PPB). تم جمع البيانات من خلال اختبارات فهم القراءة، وتقييمات الكتابة، وملاحظات الفصل الدراسي، والمقابلات شبه المنظمة. كشفت النتائج عن تحسينات كبيرة في فهم القراءة لدى الطلاب (متوسط القبلي = ٥٨,٤، المتوسط البعدي = ٧٨,٩، مستوى دلالة 0.001 <، حجم التأثير = ١,٧٨)، إلى جانب تحسينات في التفكير النقدي وإنتاج اللغة. يتكون نموذج CLAL من خمس مراحل متسلسلة: التعرض للنص، والاستجابة الشخصية، والتفكير النقدي، والمناقشة التعاونية، وإنتاج اللغة. ويقدم هذا النموذج إطاراً عملياً قائماً على الأدلة التجريبية لمعلمي اللغة العربية، يمكنهم من خلاله تحويل ممارساتهم التعليمية نحو تعلم تفسيري تأملي متمركز حول الطالب.

تعلم اللغة العربية؛ الأطر الأدبية النقدية؛ نظرية استجابة القارئ؛ علم أصول التدريس النقدي؛ البحث القائم على التصميم

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INTRODUCTION

Arabic language learning in many educational contexts, including Indonesia, has long been dominated by structural and grammar-oriented approaches that prioritize linguistic accuracy over meaning-making and critical engagement. This traditional paradigm, often rooted in behaviorist and transmission-based pedagogies, positions learners as passive recipients of linguistic rules rather than active constructors of meaning. Several studies have documented this grammar-dominant tendency specifically within Arabic-as-a-foreign-language (AFL) and Arabic-as-a-second-language (ASL) pedagogy. Ryding (2013) observed that Arabic language instruction, particularly in higher education, remains heavily oriented toward form-focused accuracy, with literary texts often reduced to linguistic exercises rather than opportunities for interpretive engagement. Similarly, Wahba (2012) noted that Arabic curricula in university settings overwhelmingly emphasize grammatical rules and vocabulary drills at the expense of reading comprehension and critical analysis. Al-Batal (2017) further argued that despite growing calls for reform, Arabic language programs continue to privilege grammatical accuracy over meaning-making and student-centered approaches. The importance of reevaluating this approach cannot be overstated, as the goals of language education have evolved to include not only communicative competence but also critical thinking, interpretive skills, and cultural awareness. In an era in which learners are expected to navigate complex texts and diverse perspectives, language instruction must move beyond mechanical drills toward more reflective and meaningful learning experiences (Zhao, 2022).

Despite these evolving educational goals, Arabic language instruction at the university level—including at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang—continues to face several persistent problems. First, classroom practices remain predominantly teacher-centered, with instructors delivering grammatical explanations through lectures while students passively take notes and memorize rules (Machmudah et al., 2021). These concerns are supported by preliminary needs analysis conducted at UIN Malang prior to the implementation of the present study. Initial classroom observations suggested that instructional practices were predominantly teacher-centered, with substantial class time devoted to grammar explanations and relatively limited opportunities for student-led discussion or interpretive activities. A preliminary review of course syllabi and assessment documents further indicated that evaluation tended to emphasize grammatical accuracy, vocabulary knowledge, and discrete-point language exercises, with limited attention to interpretive or critical engagement with texts. In addition, pre-implementation interviews with instructors indicated that literary texts were

frequently used primarily as sources for vocabulary and grammar practice, rather than as materials for interpretation, critical reflection, or discussion. These local findings are consistent with broader observations in Arabic language pedagogy concerning the persistent emphasis on formal linguistic knowledge and teacher-directed instruction (Ryding, 2013; Wahba, 2012;). Consequently, students may have limited opportunities to develop the ability to engage with literary and non-literary Arabic texts beyond the sentence level, interpret meanings critically, and connect textual perspectives with their own experiences and contemporary social issues.

Similarly, the integration of literary criticism into Arabic language pedagogy remains underdeveloped and problematic. While reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005) have been widely applied in general and English language education to foster interpretive and emancipatory learning, their application in Arabic instruction has been sporadic and unsystematic. Most Arabic language educators may lack a practical framework for incorporating critical literary perspectives into their teaching. Even when instructors are familiar with critical theories, they often do not know how to translate these theories into concrete classroom activities that promote personal response, critical reflection, and collaborative meaning-making. Consequently, students may have limited opportunities to engage with Arabic texts as sites of interpretation, critique, and personal connection. This problem is particularly acute in higher education, where students are expected to develop higher-order thinking skills that prepare them for academic and professional engagement with complex Arabic texts across various disciplines.

Several recent studies have explored innovations in Arabic language teaching, though these efforts remain fragmented. In technology-enhanced Arabic instruction, Al-Busaidi (2021) and Al-Jarf (2022) reported positive effects on engagement and motivation, while Khambali, Machmudah, and Halimi (2024) highlighted the importance of structured pedagogical design in online learning—yet these studies do not address interpretive or critical engagement with texts. A second line of inquiry has focused on literature in language teaching: Paran (2017) and Hall (2015) demonstrated that literary texts enhance comprehension and cultural awareness, while Xie (2021) found that short stories promote deeper engagement than textbook passages; in the Arabic context, Zuhdy and Mustofa (2020) showed the feasibility of integrating Arabic literary style into writing instruction. Collectively, these studies affirm the value of literary texts but treat them primarily as linguistic resources rather than sites for critical inquiry. A third strand has drawn on reader-response theory and critical pedagogy, predominantly outside Arabic: Liang (2018) and Beach (2020) demonstrated that reader-response approaches foster engagement and critical thinking in English

literature classrooms, while Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy has been influential across educational contexts (Giroux, 2020; McLaren, 2018 see also Gungenci, 2025, for a recent empirical application in pre-service teacher education). However, these frameworks remain largely untested and unoperationalized in Arabic language instruction.

Despite the growing body of research on Arabic language pedagogy and literary theory, a significant gap persists at their intersection. Previous studies have examined technology-enhanced Arabic instruction (Al-Busaidi, 2021; Al-Jarf, 2022), the general benefits of literary texts in language learning (Paran, 2017; Hall, 2015), and the application of reader-response theory in non-Arabic language contexts (Liang, 2018; Beach, 2020). However, to the authors' knowledge, no study has systematically integrated critical literary frameworks—specifically combining reader-response theory and critical pedagogy—into a comprehensive pedagogical model for Arabic language learning. Most existing approaches treat literary texts merely as vehicles for vocabulary or grammar practice rather than as opportunities for critical engagement and meaning-making (Xie, 2021). Furthermore, while critical pedagogy has been influential in general education (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2020), its application to Arabic language instruction remains largely theoretical and unoperationalized. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by developing an empirically tested model that bridges critical literary theory and Arabic language pedagogy.

Based on the identified gap, this study aimed to integrate critical literary frameworks into Arabic language learning through the development and implementation of the Critical Literary-Based Arabic Learning (CLAL) model. Specifically, this research sought to: (1) design a pedagogical model that systematically incorporates reader-response theory and critical pedagogy into Arabic language instruction; (2) implement the CLAL model in a university-level Arabic classroom; and (3) evaluate its effectiveness in enhancing students' reading comprehension, critical thinking, and language production skills. The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it bridges the long-standing divide between literary theory and language pedagogy by demonstrating how reader-response and critical frameworks can be operationalized in Arabic instruction. Practically, it provides a ready-to-use five-stage instructional model (text exposure, personal response, critical reflection, collaborative discussion, and language production) that can be adopted or adapted by Arabic language educators. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the Method section describes the DBR design, implementation procedures, and evaluation instruments; the Results section presents both quantitative and qualitative findings; and the Discussion section elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications of the CLAL model.

METHOD

This study employed a single-cycle mixed-methods design to develop, implement, and pilot-test the Critical Literary-Based Arabic Learning (CLAL) model. While informed by design-based research (DBR) principles, particularly its emphasis on developing theoretically grounded interventions in authentic classroom contexts (Reeves, 2019; Wang & Hannafin, 2005), the current study reported findings from a single implementation cycle. DBR principles guided the study in three ways: (1) needs analysis informed the model's initial design; (2) ongoing observations and feedback during implementation allowed for minor adjustments (e.g., additional scaffolding for lower-proficiency learners, extended time for critical reflection); and (3) evaluation combined quantitative and qualitative data to assess feasibility and preliminary effectiveness.

The research procedure was organized into four interconnected phases: (1) needs analysis, (2) model design, (3) classroom implementation, and (4) evaluation. This single-cycle pilot evaluation provided preliminary evidence of the model's potential and established a basis for subsequent iterative DBR cycles.

This research was conducted at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, a prominent Islamic university in East Java, Indonesia. The university was selected because it has a well-established Arabic language program across multiple faculties and a Language Development Center (Pusat Pengembangan Bahasa) that offers intensive Arabic courses.

The participants were 90 undergraduate students enrolled in three intact classes during the 2024-2025 academic year: 30 students from the Pendidikan Bahasa Arab program (FITK), 30 from the Bahasa dan Sastra Arab program (FH), and 30 from the Advanced Arabic Class at the Pusat Pengembangan Bahasa (PPB). All participants were native Indonesian speakers. Their prior Arabic study ranged from less than one year (13.3%) to more than three years (46.7%). The response rate was 100%, with no participants withdrawing from the study. As the three groups were existing intact classes selected through convenience/purposive sampling rather than random assignment, they exhibited pre-existing differences in proficiency (pretest means: FITK = 62.3, FH = 60.1, PPB = 52.8). This non-equivalent design is acknowledged as a limitation and is addressed further in the conclusions section.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Reading comprehension test.

A 20-item multiple-choice test was developed to measure students' ability to understand and interpret Arabic literary texts. The test comprised three subscales: literal comprehension (7 items), interpretive comprehension (7 items),

and critical analysis (6 items). A sample critical analysis item was: "What assumption about social power or identity does the author make in this passage?" The test was administered as a pre-test (week 1) and post-test (week 5). The instrument was reviewed by two experts and piloted with 20 students. Overall reliability was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88), with subscale reliabilities ranging from acceptable to good.

Writing assessment rubric.

Students wrote a short critical essay (250-300 words) responding to an Arabic literary text. The rubric assessed four dimensions: grammar and syntax, vocabulary, coherence and organization, and critical insight, each scored on a 1-5 scale (maximum total 20). Two trained raters independently scored all writing samples. Inter-rater reliability (ICC) was 0.85.

Classroom observation protocol.

A structured observation protocol was used to document classroom interactions during the CLAL model implementation. Observations focused on the five CLAL stages. Field notes were taken during each session and transcribed within 24 hours.

Semi-structured interviews.

Interviews were conducted with 18 participants (6 from each program) after the post-test. Interviews explored students' perceptions of the CLAL model, perceived development in critical thinking, and suggestions for improvement. Interviews lasted 15-20 minutes, were conducted in Indonesian, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Research Procedure

The research was conducted over six weeks. In week 1, informed consent was obtained, the reading comprehension pre-test was administered, and the three instructors received a 4-hour training workshop on implementing the CLAL model. During weeks 2-4, the CLAL model was implemented across six 120-minute class sessions (two sessions per week) in each program. Each session followed the five-stage sequence: text exposure, personal response, critical reflection, collaborative discussion, and language production. During weeks 5-6, the reading comprehension post-test was administered, students completed the writing assessment, classroom observations continued, and interviews were conducted.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for pre-test and post-test scores. A paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare pre-test and post-test scores for the total sample (N=90). A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare

post-test scores across the three programs. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

Qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Themes were identified both inductively and deductively based on the five CLAL stages. Analysis was conducted separately for each program before synthesizing across-program themes.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The CLAL Model and Its Implementation

The CLAL Model (Critical Literary-Based Arabic Learning Model) is built on three philosophical pillars: language as meaning-making (reader-response), learning as a critical process (Freire's critical pedagogy), and students as active subjects (constructivism). These pillars are operationalized through five linear-progressive stages: Text Exposure (literal comprehension), Personal Response (subjective engagement), Critical Reflection (analysis of power and ideology), Collaborative Discussion (social negotiation of meaning), and Language Production (synthesis into written or oral output). This progression was design to move students from comprehension to critical engagement and finally to productive language use.

The CLAL model was implemented across six 120-minute sessions in each program. The five stages were enacted as follows.

Stage 1: Text exposure. Students were introduced to Arabic literary texts, including a short story by Taufiq al-Hakim (Arwah Fi Al-Qaryah), a poem by Mahmoud Darwish (Bitaqat Hawiyyah), and a fable from Kalilah wa Dimnah. The instructor read the text aloud while students followed along. Basic unfamiliar vocabulary was glossed, but no detailed interpretation was provided.

Stage 2: Personal response. Students wrote brief reflections responding to prompts such as "What does this text mean to me?" and "What feelings or thoughts does this text evoke?" Students from the FH program produced longer, more literary responses, while PPB students often focused on emotional and personal connections.

Stage 3: Critical reflection. The instructor posed critical questions such as "Whose voice is represented in this text?" and "What assumptions does the author make about society?" This stage was initially challenging for some students, particularly in the PPB class, but became more natural by the third session.

Stage 4: Collaborative discussion. Students formed small groups of four to five and discussed their interpretations for 15-20 minutes. Discussions were lively and engaged, with students building on each other's ideas.

Stage 5: Language production. Students produced written outputs synthesizing their interpretations, progressing from paragraph responses (150 words) to extended essays with peer feedback (300 words).

Quantitative Findings

The reading comprehension test was administered to all 90 participants as a pre-test in week 1 and post-test in week 5. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the total sample.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Reading Comprehension Scores (N=90)

Assessment	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-test	58.4	12.3	32	82
Post-test	78.9	10.1	54	94

The mean score increased from 58.4 (SD = 12.3) in the pre-test to 78.9 (SD = 10.1) in the post-test, representing an improvement of 20.5 points. The reduction in standard deviation from pre-test (12.3) to post-test (10.1) suggests that students' performance became more homogeneous after the CLAL model implementation.

A paired-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant improvement ($t(89) = 15.82$, $p < .001$) with a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.78$). This indicates that the CLAL model had a substantial positive effect on students' reading comprehension and critical analysis abilities.

Table 2. presents the pre-test and post-test mean scores for each of the three programs

Program	N	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Improvement
Pendidikan Bahasa Arab (FITK)	30	62.3 (10.8)	81.5 (8.9)	19.2
Bahasa dan Sastra Arab (FH)	30	60.1 (11.2)	82.7 (9.3)	22.6
Pusat Pengembangan Bahasa (PPB)	30	52.8 (12.9)	72.5 (10.6)	19.7

All three programs demonstrated substantial improvements. The Bahasa dan Sastra Arab (FH) program showed the largest absolute improvement (22.6 points), while the Pendidikan Bahasa Arab (FITK) program had the highest post-test mean score (81.5). The Pusat Pengembangan Bahasa (PPB) class, despite having the lowest pre-test mean (52.8), still achieved a 19.7-point improvement.

A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in post-test scores across the three programs ($F(2, 87) = 4.28$, $p = .017$). Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test indicated that the FITK ($M = 81.5$) and FH ($M = 82.7$) programs performed significantly better than the PPB program ($M =$

72.5), but did not differ significantly from each other ($p = .78$). However, this post-test difference should be interpreted with caution, as it may partly reflect pre-existing group differences (PPB pre-test $M = 52.8$ vs. FITK = 62.3; FH = 60.1) rather than treatment alone. Future research using ANCOVA with pre-test covariates is recommended to isolate the treatment effect. The writing assessment results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Writing Assessment Results by Dimension (N=90)

Dimension	Mean Score (SD)	Maximum Possible	Percentage
Grammar and Syntax	4.1 (0.7)	5	82%
Vocabulary	4.3 (0.6)	5	86%
Coherence and Organization	4.0 (0.8)	5	80%
Critical Insight	4.2 (0.7)	5	84%
Total	16.6 (2.1)	20	83%

Students demonstrated the strongest performance in vocabulary (4.3) and grammar (4.1), while coherence received the lowest score (4.0). The critical insight dimension, which is the distinctive feature of the CLAL model, achieved a mean score of 4.2 (84%), indicating that students were able to offer meaningful interpretations, support their claims with evidence from the text, and reflect critically on textual meaning.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of classroom observations and interviews revealed three major themes.

Theme 1: Progressive deepening of engagement. Across the six weeks, student engagement became qualitatively deeper. In early sessions, personal responses were brief and often focused on surface features. By weeks 4-6, responses showed greater interpretive sophistication.

Theme 2: Increased comfort with ambiguity. Initially, many students expressed frustration that the instructor did not provide "correct" interpretations. By week 4, students began to recognize that multiple interpretations could be valid.

Theme 3: Perceived improvement in critical thinking. The majority of interviewed students (15 out of 18) reported that the CLAL model helped them think more critically about texts. One student stated: "Before, I only understood what the text said literally. Now I ask: why did the author write this? Who benefits from this message?" (FH-09).

This study addresses a critical gap in Arabic language pedagogy by providing, to the authors' knowledge, one of the first empirical operationalizations of reader-response theory and critical pedagogy in a comprehensive instructional model for

Arabic. The very large effect size ($d = 1.78$) aligns with findings from Liang (2018) and Beach (2020), who demonstrated that reader-response approaches increase engagement and critical thinking in English language teaching, while extending their applicability to Arabic contexts. This result also is consistent with Paran (2017) and Hall (2015), who argued that literary texts approached through interpretive frameworks enhance comprehension more effectively than textbook passages. Nevertheless, the large effect size should be interpreted with caution, as the novelty of the intervention and the Hawthorne effect (i.e., increased engagement due to participants' awareness of being in a new program) may have contributed to the observed gains, rather than the specific theoretical framework alone.

In contrast to studies that treat literary texts merely as vehicles for vocabulary or grammar practice (Xie, 2021), or that focus solely on technology-enhanced instruction without pedagogical reorientation (Al-Busaidi, 2021; Al-Jarf, 2022), the CLAL model demonstrates that critical literary engagement yields substantially greater improvements in both reading comprehension and higher-order thinking. The cross-program differences align with Krashen's (1982) theory that prior linguistic knowledge facilitates deeper engagement, while the PPB program's 19.7-point improvement confirms Ellis's (2020) emphasis on scaffolding for lower-proficiency learners—a pattern consistent with Liang (2018). Furthermore, the qualitative finding that students became more comfortable with interpretive ambiguity reflects a shift from Freire's (2005) "banking model" to active meaning-making, reinforcing Giroux's (2020) assertion that critical pedagogy fundamentally reorients the student-teacher relationship.

The CLAL model makes two foundational theoretical contributions. First, it provides the first systematic operationalization of Freirean critical pedagogy in Arabic language instruction, demonstrating that principles of questioning authority, examining power relations, and fostering emancipatory learning can be concretely implemented through instructional stages—extending McLaren's (2018) assertion that critical pedagogy is adaptable across contexts, and addressing the theoretical gap identified by Khambali et al. (2024) and Zuhdy and Mustofa (2020), whose studies remained structural or theoretical. Second, it operationalizes Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory by guiding students from an efferent to an aesthetic stance, as evidenced by their increased interpretive diversity and comfort with multiple meanings—a shift that Beach (2020) identified as central to critical thinking development.

Third, the CLAL model offers a replicable five-stage framework (text exposure, personal response, critical reflection, collaborative discussion, and language production) that integrates literary theory with language pedagogy. The findings suggest that critical engagement can simultaneously support linguistic

skills and critical analysis. The theoretical implication is that reader-response and critical pedagogy frameworks may be adaptable to non-Western language learning contexts, extending their applicability beyond English literature classrooms to Arabic language education.

Practically, the model provides Arabic educators with a ready-to-use framework for moving beyond grammar-oriented instruction toward interpretive, reflective, and student-centered learning. These contributions respond to Giroux's (2020) call for concrete applications of critical pedagogy in disciplinary contexts, while also extending reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) to Arabic language pedagogy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study successfully developed and empirically evaluated the Critical Literary-Based Arabic Learning (CLAL) model, demonstrating that integrating reader-response theory and critical pedagogy into Arabic language instruction significantly improves students' reading comprehension ($d = 1.78$), critical thinking, and language production skills across three learner populations at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. The five-stage model (text exposure, personal response, critical reflection, collaborative discussion, and language production) proved to be a coherent and implementable framework that bridges literary theory and Arabic pedagogy, extending the cross-linguistic validity of reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) to the Arabic context while offering a preliminary operationalization of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2020) in a domain where it remained largely unapplied. Practically, the CLAL model provides Arabic educators with a ready-to-use framework for shifting from grammar-oriented toward interpretive, reflective, and student-centered learning.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study employed a single-cycle, non-controlled, one-group design with intact classes, limiting causal inference and generalizability. The three participant groups were existing intact classes selected through convenience/purposive sampling rather than random assignment, and they exhibited pre-existing differences in Arabic proficiency (pre-test means: FITK = 62.3, FH = 60.1, PPB = 52.8), which may have influenced the post-test results. For future research, experimental designs with control groups and delayed post-tests are recommended to establish causal inference and assess long-term retention, along with replication across diverse educational contexts (secular institutions, secondary schools, and non-Indonesian settings). Additionally, future studies should examine the model's applicability to speaking and listening skills, adapt it to other languages with rich literary traditions, and

develop standardized assessment instruments for critical literary-based language learning.

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